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RE IMAGINING
THE JOB OF LEADING SCHOOLS

Lessons from a 10-year journey

By the staff of The Wallace Foundation

Quality leadership is a must in any important human pursuit, and education is no exception. While teachers have the most direct and obvious impact on student learning, the school leader is in the best position to ensure that excellent teaching and learning aren't limited to single classrooms but spread throughout entire schools. Indeed, research finds few documented cases of turning around a failing school absent the strong hand of a qualified leader. Improving leadership, then, holds particular promise as an effective way for states and districts to help better the fortunes of the nation's most underserved students.

Those are the facts and convictions at the heart of a decade-long commitment by The Wallace Foundation to work with states and urban districts across the country to change the lives of education leaders so that they, in turn, are better able to lift the educational fortunes of every student in every school in America.

To translate that ideal into practice, however, we believed at the onset that at least two related challenges had to be addressed. First, the field needed to know more about what constitutes good leadership, how to train for it, and how to support it on the job. Ten years later, we have much clearer answers to those basic questions, and we also have examples of places that are actively putting solutions into practice from which others can learn.

The second challenge was to supply the necessary proof to persuade state and district leaders that improving school leadership deserved significant, sustained attention and investment. If meaningful change were to occur, it could no longer be secondary to other reform priorities. There, too, we've seen real progress in the last decade. Not only have states and districts taken serious steps to improve training and support of school leaders, but U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has been a vocal champion for ensuring that principals take their rightful and long-neglected place as central players in turning around the nation's most troubled schools.

Yet the truth remains that, for many principals — especially in the most disadvantaged school systems — the ideal of being a highly trained, fully supported leader of learning has not been fully realized. More often, school leaders spend much of their days disconnected from the core business of better learning. Consider the frustration of one elementary principal in Kentucky we met a few years ago. Before the start of each school year,

he told us, he would picture himself visiting every classroom in his school daily. He'd sit with teachers, one-on-one, and help them improve their performance. He'd work with teacher teams to hear their thinking and share authority for improving learning schoolwide. In short, he imagined himself as a real leader of learning. Then reality would hit each September, with a daily stream of administrative or disciplinary duties, scores of e-mails to answer, urgent phone calls, and unscheduled visits by parents.

The passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 shortly after we began this work created a nationwide sense of urgency by exposing how students everywhere are performing and by providing tough sanctions on schools that continue to fail in helping each child to be successful. The new accountability standards have awakened states and districts to leadership's potential to improve learning and fueled demand for evidence and practical lessons about leadership, its potential, and how best to train and support leaders.

Those lessons can be grouped under four ideas:
1. The job of leading schools needs to change fundamentally.
2. Leadership training must change to correspond with this new definition of good leadership.
3. School leadership requires conditions that will allow leaders to drive better teaching and learning throughout their schools.
4. States and districts need to collaborate closely to ensure that policies and practices at all levels of the school system are aligned with supporting principals as effective leaders of learning.

The job of leading schools needs to change fundamentally.

An extensive body of research has settled the bedrock question: Leadership does count in improving learning. In fact, it is "second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn in school." Furthermore, there are few cases where schools have significantly improved without a skilled principal's guiding hand (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

Realizing leadership's full potential to jump-start learning requires very different thinking about what principals should do. Effective leadership, especially in the most disadvantaged schools, means the ability to transform the school culture around the core priority of making every child a successful learner. It means that principals need to get out of their offices and spend more time each week in classrooms to observe and knowledgeably comment on what is and isn't working. In addition, a newly published examination of effective urban leadership concludes that principals need to set a schoolwide vision for learning success by all students, and then share responsibility with all adults in the school for realizing that vision (Portin, et al., 2009).

This perception of successful instructional leadership differs greatly from the common notion of principals as solo heroes. There is mounting evidence that if school leaders are to spread teaching and learning excellence beyond isolated classrooms, they need to create high-functioning instructional teams and distribute authority among staff members in the school building (including teacher leaders) to realize that vision, and then provide support to help others exercise their shared responsibility for improved learning (Portin, et al., 2009).

Leadership training must change to correspond with this new definition of good leadership.

If the duties and responsibilities of leadership need to change fundamentally, it follows that the preparation aspiring school leaders receive needs a similar overhaul. University-based leadership programs that train the majority of future principals have been called "the weakest programs in the nation's education schools" (Levine, 2005). These programs have been criticized as being indiscriminate in whom they admit, unresponsive to the current needs and realities of districts, and misdirected in their lack of emphasis on instructional improvement or transformational leadership. Some critics doubt that these programs will improve significantly without powerful prodding from states or districts or both (see Fry, O'Neill, & Bottoms, 2006).

The good news is that the past decade has witnessed significant activity in a number of states and districts aimed at raising the quality of leadership training. Since 2005, more than 200 university-based leadership programs in 16 Wallace-funded states have either been forced by the state to redesign their programs to align with standards and effective training practices or shut down for failing to do so.

More districts are also discovering their own consumer power to influence the training of the school leaders they will eventually hire. New York City is among a growing number of districts that have opened leadership academies to prepare leaders capable of turning around the toughest schools. A study by the Education Development Center describes how some districts are becoming more discerning customers by being more selective in hiring program graduates (for example, Chicago; Ft. Wayne, Ind.; and Louisville, Ky.); using contracts and other inducements to influence universities to improve their selection criteria or program content (Louisville; St. Louis, Mo.; Chicago and Springfield, Ill.); or becoming competitive with universities by starting up their own district-level preparation programs (New York City; Providence, R.I.; Ft. Wayne, Ind.; Springfield and Boston, Mass.) (King, LaPointe, & Orr, 2009).

To guide these reform efforts, we also have solid evidence about how best to train new leaders who can transform schools and improve teaching and learning. A report by Stanford researchers identified a number of effective training practices based

on an examination of nine exemplary preservice and inservice programs. They include: a standards-based, coherent curriculum emphasizing instructional and transformative leadership; instruction that integrates theory and practice; knowledgeable faculty, including experienced practitioners; more selective admissions and recruitment policies; and well-designed supervised internships (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007).

Finally, about half of the nation's states and many districts have abandoned their sink-or-swim attitudes toward novice principals and now provide mentoring for one year or more. New York City has been a standout in this growing trend. The NYC Leadership Academy, opened in 2003 with Wallace funding, has provided such support to more than 800 new principals. More recently, that mentoring has been made available on a voluntary basis up through the fourth year on the job.

School leadership requires conditions that will allow leaders to drive better teaching and learning throughout their schools.

Even the best-trained principals won't succeed or survive for long unless states and districts pay serious attention to the conditions that support or stand in the way of these leaders. Among those where Wallace and its partners have developed significant new knowledge are:

- Useful, timely data to inform decision making;
- Leader performance assessments that accurately measure and reinforce what matters most; and
- More time for leaders to focus on instruction.

Over the last decade, many states within and beyond the Wallace network have adopted laws and policies to address those needs. But translating laws and policies into practice has proven difficult because doing so often involves reallocating scarce time or money, revising contracts, shifting people or their roles, or changing cherished behaviors or customs.

DATA, DATA EVERYWHERE

On the desk of Benton Harbor (Mich.) elementary principal Ericka Harris-Robinson sat a foot-thick state report called the "Golden Book." It told her how every student in grades 3 to 6 performed on every question on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program. But it contained no guidance on how to interpret or make use of that data to improve the teaching of her mostly disadvantaged students. "It does you no good to just get numbers. You need to get information," she said (Colvin, 2007).

States and districts churn out loads of education data. But it often isn't the right data, delivered in useful, timely forms, needed to help district and school leaders diagnose and address learning problems. And, too often, leaders or others in the school lack the analytic skills to make sense of the information and construct so-lution-oriented conversations around the data they have.

This is starting to change. An analysis by University of Washington researchers finds that urban districts, including Atlanta, New York City, Portland, and Eugene, Ore., are increasingly investing in new data systems, in data literacy for school staff, and in generating new forms of data (for example, regular surveys of principals or other school-level staff concerning district support). These investments, the report concludes, will enable school administrators to "drill down to individual students and track progress toward one or more district-defined learning targets" (Plecki, et al., 2009).

Numerous states have recently enacted laws to put in place data systems and warehouses to provide school leaders with the right information, in usable forms, to guide decisions on resource allocation, improving teacher quality, and increasing student achievement. Some states have begun providing local districts with guidance and expert help in using state-generated data to diagnose learning problems and monitor student progress. New Mexico, for example, is helping local districts use such tools as pivot tables to enable them to extract information about individual student performance by grade, subject matter, or particular teachers from raw data (Feemster, 2007).

ASSESSING LEADER PERFORMANCE

The way that states and districts measure the performance of school leaders could influence how the jobs are reshaped. Effective assessment processes can identify and reinforce the most effective leader behaviors, pinpoint individual weaknesses, and help districts tailor professional development and other support to correct them. Unfortunately, education has been slower than many other fields in developing such leader assessment processes.

This, too, is changing. For the first time, an education leader assessment called VAL-ED meets those quality criteria. Created by researchers from Vanderbilt University and the University of Pennsylvania with Wallace's support, the system was tested in a number of Wallace-funded states and districts and marketed for broad use in 2008. The results found that VAL-ED has "excellent reliability, strong validity, initial national norms for reporting percentile ranks, and performance standards to identify 'distinguished,' 'proficient,' 'basic,' and 'below basic' principals" (Porter, et al., 2008). Delaware, Kentucky, Iowa, and Ohio are at varying stages of developing and implementing their own leader assessments that aim at similar purposes.

THE GIFT OF TIME

Most school principals struggle to focus more time on instructional matters. The average principal spends a third or less of his or her time each day on matters directly related to teaching and learning, studies indicate. One potential remedy pioneered in Louisville with Wallace's backing provides schools with an additional administrator, known as a School Administration Manager (SAM). The SAM's job is to relieve principals of rou-

tine administrative chores such as checking bus schedules, managing school facilities, or supervising discipline so that principals can concentrate more time on improving teaching and learning. More than 300 schools in nine state or district sites have participated in the SAM project since 2005. While it's early to judge the full value of having a SAM, an independent evaluation of the project found that after one year, principals were spending an average of about an hour more per day on instruction, including more classroom observations and more opportunities to provide feedback to teachers (Turnbull, et al., 2009).

Experience has also taught that changing principals' priorities doesn't automatically happen by adding a new administrator. The SAM project found that principals generally need help in dropping comfortable administrative routines and shifting more time and attention toward instructional improvement. A key feature of the SAM project is a time-tracking tool that allows principals to chart how much time they are spending each week on instruction. Armed with that information, coaches can then work with principals to help them change their priorities.

States and districts need to collaborate closely to ensure that policies and practices at all levels of the school system are aligned with supporting principals as effective leaders of learning.

A well-coordinated, supportive leadership system with the ultimate aim of better student achievement begins with a shared vision at the state, district, and school level of what good leadership is. That vision is then captured in statewide leadership standards. Almost all states have now adopted such standards. States then need to bring those standards to life by ensuring that leadership training provided by universities and others are aligned to those standards, as are certification and licensure, as well as the data they provide to districts. Districts, for their part, need to enforce basic expectations for their leaders through incentives and performance assessments. They need to collaborate with local universities to ensure the relevance of leadership training. They need to provide mentoring and other professional development to new and veteran principals, and set hiring, evaluation, and succession policies. They should also provide leaders with the authority to allocate people, money, and other resources to where they're most needed to improve learning.

When, by contrast, state and district policies affecting leaders are out of synch or poorly connected to the core goal of better teaching and learning, the results can seriously undermine the effectiveness of training and professional development leaders receive, and working conditions that affect their daily lives, to the detriment of their ability to function as leaders of learning.

Recent efforts by states and districts to achieve cohesive leadership systems with Wallace's support have proven difficult, but

There is more to learn about:

- How best to strengthen principals' skills and performance;
- How to interpret and use data, including test scores, to identify areas of improvement for principals and act constructively on those findings;
- How to do more to ensure that best practices identified in new research about effective leadership training take hold in all institutions, not just a relative few;
- How to spread the lessons we're learning about cohesive leadership systems beyond the relatively small number of states that have made major progress in developing them.

new research by RAND concludes that developing such systems is a possible and promising means of ensuring that principals throughout entire states get the preparation and support they need. Three states in particular — Delaware, Iowa, and Kentucky — were found by RAND to have made the most progress in creating such systems (Augustine, et al., 2009). States making the most progress tend to have a history of collaboration, political support, and strong state-district connections, and comparatively little staff turnover at key policy positions. The impetus for developing and maintaining a cohesive state-district leadership system can come from a variety of sources — often within state government, but also from an innovative, committed district, or (as in Iowa, for example) a professional organization representing school administrators within the state.

One benefit of a cohesive leadership system identified by RAND's research is that the more successful a state is in developing such a system, the more time principals tend to devote to improving instruction.

LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING: A WORK IN PROGRESS

After a decade of effort, there's still much to learn and more to accomplish in raising the quality of leadership so that many more students benefit. A number of states and districts have made significant improvements in leadership training, but we are still in the beginning stages overall in improving the key conditions affecting school leadership. There is more to learn about how best to strengthen principals' skills and performance; how to interpret and use data, including test scores, to identify areas of improvement for principals and act constructively on those findings; how to do more to ensure that best practices identified in new research about effective leadership training take hold in all institutions, not just a relative few; and how to spread the lessons we're learning about cohesive leadership systems beyond the relatively small number of states that have made major progress in developing them. We don't yet know how much difference high-quality leadership will ultimately make in creating measurable

student achievement gains, given its indirect effect compared with teaching.

What we do know is that without enough qualified leaders, the goal we've set for ourselves as a nation of transforming failing schools into places where all students succeed will be difficult to achieve. If high-quality teaching is the lynchpin for any reform approach to succeed, effective school leadership is the key to making good teaching happen in all classrooms, not just a few. Armed with what we've learned over the last decade about leadership's potential and what it takes to prepare and support it, we are optimistic that the field's long neglect of leadership is ending. Signs are everywhere that this imperative to improve leadership has finally earned its place in school reform and is gaining traction in ways that are worth learning from, preserving, and building upon.

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